

How to use academic articles

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What is an academic article?

An academic article is an article that has been written by an expert. Usually the writer works in the field they are writing about. Academic articles focus on a very specific topic and are more up to date than books.

Academic articles are sometimes also called scholarly articles.

What does “peer reviewed” mean?

The article has been read by other experts on the topic and they have confirmed that it is correct and trustworthy.

What are the parts of an academic article?

Abstract

This is a summary of the article, including the author’s aims and a brief explanation of their conclusion.

Keywords

A list of the main topics the article focuses on.

You can use the abstract and keywords to decide whether or not the article is relevant to you.

Introduction

Like the introduction to an essay, here the author introduces their topic. This could include what they plan to study or discuss, and why they feel this is important.

Scientific articles

Method

How authors conduct their research.

Results

The data from their research.

Discussion

Here the authors talk about whether conclusions may be drawn from the data, and anything else they feel is important to note.

Humanities articles

Discussion

Here the authors examine their topic and address their research question. They may refer to books and articles other scholars have written.

Conclusion

Here the authors sum up their argument or discoveries, explain their significance and sometimes suggest areas for research in the future.

How to read academic articles

Generally you won't read an academic article from beginning to end like you would a news article. To get the most out of it you will need to read some sections more than once.

1. Is it useful to you?

Start by reading the abstract and keywords

If the article definitely isn't what you need then you can close it and move on without reading any further.

If the article is useful, use the abstract to understand what argument the author will be making.

If you're not sure if the article is useful, read the introduction and the conclusion as well and that should be enough to know.

2. How is it organized? Which parts are important and which parts can you skim?

- Read through the subheadings if there are subheadings
- If not, skim the article to get an idea of how it is organized
- Then you will know which parts you need to read closely
- Use bookmarks or notes to mark those sections, if it helps

When you're looking through to decide which parts are important, think about why you are reading it. This will help decide what to focus closely on and what you can skim.

Eg. If you're reading an analysis of the novel Emma for English you can skim over long discussions about English politics in the 1850s, but if you're researching the Regency period for history then you would focus on the detailed politics and skim over the literary analysis.

If the author includes a detailed discussion of the literature or a long explanation of why the article is important, you can probably also skim those sections. But keep an eye out to see whether they talk about other important articles written on the topic.

3. What are the author's main arguments or ideas?

Read through the parts that you have marked as important and make sure you understand the author's main arguments or ideas well enough to summarise them.

Take notes on the information you need, so that you have it in an easier format when you sit down to write your task.

Highlight any quotes or details you want to include in your assignment, and make a note of what page they are on if you are doing in-text referencing.

What if it's really complicated?

Sometimes academic articles are hard to read because they're long, they have a lot of big words or they're just not written in a very interesting way.

If you're getting completely lost you have three options:

1. You can look up every word you don't know so you can 'translate' the article as you read.
2. You can keep reading over the unfamiliar words and complex arguments because sometimes reading the whole section will give you a general idea of what the author is talking about, without getting bogged down trying to fully understand each new word or difficult idea. You can write the words down to look up later.
3. You can abandon the article and find something that's easier. Don't do this until you've made a genuine attempt to understand the article though, because it could turn out to be a really useful resource if you persevere.

How to find academic articles

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com.au/>

NSW State Library: <https://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/eresources/>

Open Access databases

How to reference academic articles

If you are using the SLASA Referencing Generator, open the Senior resources and look at the section called *Periodical article – database*.

Bibliography

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